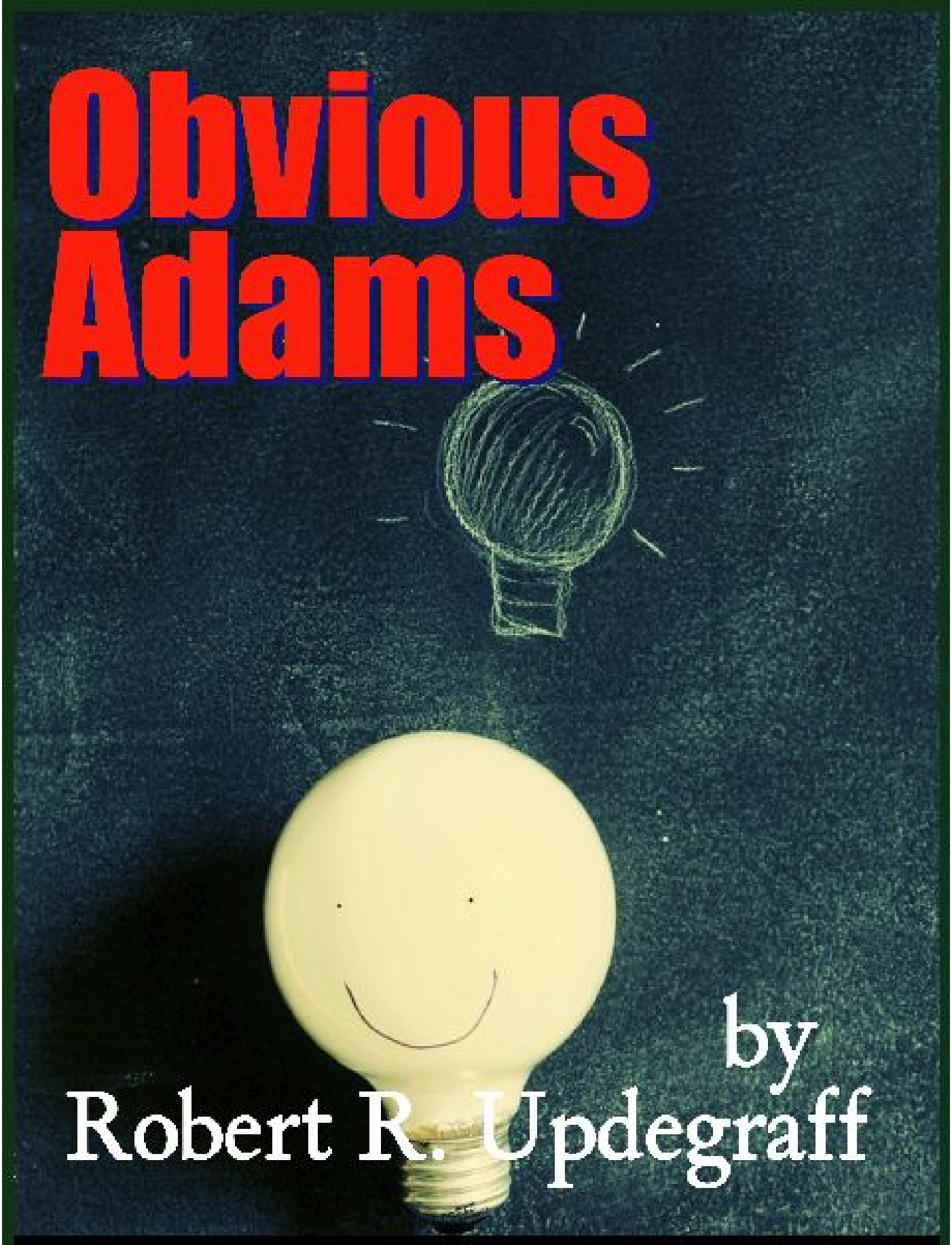
Obvious Adams



by

Robert R. Updegraff

Masters of Marketing Secrets:
The Story of a Successful Marketer

Obvious Adams

The Story of a Successful Marketer

by **Robert R. Updegraff**

Edited and Forward by **Dr. Robert C. Worstell**

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Forward

Have you ever been struck by the painfully obvious?

What passes for advertising these days seems to have forgotten what people are actually looking for.

But it's right in front of their (and your) nose.

The stories in this book were written apparently to tweak the noses of marketing as it existed in the early 1900's – but still has lessons all of use can learn from today.

There are good reasons why people spend time and money avoiding all or most ads they see. Most of this has to do with being forced to have their lives interrupted by people who just want their money.

The days of using a simple formula to “rake in millions” are over – if they ever existed.

Read on – and follow someone who simply saw things as they were...

Dr. Robert C. Worstell
April 2014

About “Obvious Adams"

In 1916, The Saturday Evening Post began publishing a column about a young man named Oliver B. "Obvious” Adams. Adams, was a fictional caricature of a would-be advertising man whose thinking was so innocent and simple that he was brilliant in spite of himself.

The column gained popularity in business circles as a source of plain wisdom, straight forward advice and actionable information. Each new column featured Adams’ employer giving the young ad man a new marketing challenge for which Adams would find the solutions “hidden” in plain sight (earning him the “Obvious” nickname).

The story of Adams was eventually published in book form by Robert Updegraff and over the years it has often been used in business schools, advertising agencies and by individuals studying entrepreneurship, advertising, and business.

1.

A lone man sat at a table by a window in the Dickens Room of the Tip Top Inn, Chicago. He had finished his dinner and was apparently waiting for his black coffee to be served.

Two men entered and were shown to a table nearby. Presently one of them glanced at the man by the window.

“See that man over there?” he whispered to his companion.

“Yes,” said the latter, looking disinterestedly in the direction indicated.

“Well, that is Obvious Adams."

“Is that so?” And he almost turned in his chair this time to get a good look at the most talked-of man in the advertising business. “Ordinary-looking man, isn’t he?"

“Yes, to look at him you would never think he was the famous Obvious Adams of the biggest advertising agency in New York. And to tell the truth, I can’t see why he’s such a little tin god in the business world.

“I’ve heard him speak two or three times at the Ad League meetings, but he never said anything that we didn’t know already. He seemed to have a lot of people buffaloed, though. I confess he was a disappointment to me."

It is funny, but that is the way most outsiders talk about Adams. And yet this same Adams has been an important factor in the success of more well-known businesses than perhaps any other one man.

Even at this moment, while the two men were talking about him, he was making business history. He had turned the menu card face down and was drawing lines and making notes on the back. To anyone looking over his shoulder the result of this work would have been meaningless, but it seemed to please Adams, for he nodded his head earnestly to himself and put the menu into his pocket as the obsequious waiter came to help him into his overcoat.

Half an hour later a telephone bell jingled in the library of a sumptuous home in an Iowa city. It rang a second time before a man lounging in a big mahogany chair in front of the fireplace arose and picked up the receiver.

“Hello!” he snapped, and he scowled at the intrusion. “Hello! Hello!

Oh, it’s you, Mr. Adams, I didn’t expect to hear from you so soon. Where are you? Chicago? You’ve got a plan? You have? Well, I’ve just been sitting here thinking about it myself, and I’ve chewed three cigars to a pulp trying to figure out what we ought to do about it."

Then silence in the sumptuous library. Then a series of what sounded like approving grunts.

“I see your idea. Yes, I think they will do it alright! I’m sure they will – they’ve go to. It’s a bully idea and I believe it will turn the trick! All right; take the night train and I’ll send my car down to the station to meet you in the morning. Good night."

For a long minute the man in the library stood and looked into the fireplace thoughtfully. “Now, why in thunder couldn’t some of us have thought of that? It’s the most natural thing in the world to do, but we had to bring a man clear from New York to show us. That Adams is a wonder anyway!” And having addressed these remarks to the andirons, he pulled out a fourth cigar, which he smoked.

And there you have the other side. That is the way insiders talk about Adams.

But we are beginning the story back end to. To know Obvious Adams, and to understand the secret of his success, we must begin at the front end of his life.

2.

It is interesting, this story of a poor boy who began life as Oliver B. Adams in a little grocery store in a small New England town, and has grown to be know everywhere in the business world as “Obvious Adams."

It seems that Adams came of very poor, hard-working parents, that he had only a meager country-school education, and that when Oliver was twelve years of age his father died and he started working in a grocery store. He was a very ordinary sort of boy. He had no particular initiative and he seldom had any particular bright ideas, and yet in some strange way business grew steadily in that store, and it continued to grow year by year. Anyone who knew old Ned Snow, the grocer, would tell you that non of the growth was his fault, for he was not the growing kind – unless you mean ingrowing. Well, things ran along uneventfully until old Snow was taken ill and died. Then the store was sold and Oliver was without a job.

The next six years of Adams’ life no one knows much about but he, and of those years he has little to say. When the grocery store was sold out he took what little money he had been able to save up and went to New York, where he worked by day in a public market and went to night school in the evenings.

Then one day something happened. Near the end of his final year at night school the principal arranged for a series of vocational talks for the benefit of the older students. The first of the talks was by James B. Oswald, president of the famous Oswald Advertising Agency. In those days Oswald was in his prime, and he was a most interesting and instructive talker, with a way of fitting his message to the needs of his hearers – which was probably why he was successful as an advertising man.

Young Oliver Adams sat spellbound throughout the talk. It was his first vision of the big world of business, and it seemed to him that Oswald was about the most wonderful man he had ever met – for he actually did meet and shake hands with him after the lecture.

On the way home he thought over what Mr. Oswald had told of the advertising business. As he prepared for bed in his little third floor room he thought over the man Oswald and decided that he must be a fine man. As he pulled the blankets up over him and nestled down into the pillows he decided that he would like to work in the advertising business. And as he slipped off to sleep he assured himself that he would like to work for such a man as James B. Oswald.

The next morning when he awoke the last two thoughts had become united: He would like to work in the advertising business – for James B. Oswald. The natural thing to do then – to Oliver Adams at least – was to go and tell that gentleman. Though the idea frightened him a little it never occurred to him for a minute but that he should do just that. And so at two o'clock that afternoon he asked for two hours off at the market, that being the quiet time of the day, and, after carefully blacking his shoes, started out for the big office building which housed the Oswald Advertising agency.

Mr. Oswald was busy, he was informed by the girl in the reception hall who had telephoned his name to the big man.

Oliver thought for a minute. "Tell him I can wait an hour and ten minutes."

The girl looked surprised, for people were not in the habit of sending such messages to the big chief. But there was something in the simple directness of the lad that seemed to make the message a perfectly natural one.

Rather to her own surprise she repeated the message to the president precisely as she had received it.

"He will see you in about twenty minutes," she announced.

Of the interview itself James Oswald used to delight to tell:

"In walked young Adams, as serious as a deacon. I didn't recognize him as one of the young men I had met the night before until he introduced himself and mentioned our meeting. Then he went on to say that he had thought the matter over and had decided that he wanted to get into the advertising business and that he wanted to work for me, and so here he was.

"I looked him over. He was a very ordinary-looking boy, it seemed to me, rather stolid, not overly bright in appearance. Then I asked him some

questions to see how quick-witted he was. He answered them all readily enough, but his answers weren't particularly clever. I liked him well enough, but he seemed to lack alertness – that little up-and-comingness that is necessary in advertising. And so finally I told him, in as kindly a way as possible, that I didn't think he was cut out for an advertising man and that I was very sorry, but I couldn't give him a position, and a lot more fatherly advice. It was really a choice little speech, firm but gentle.

"He took it all nicely enough. But instead of begging me to give him a chance, he thanked me for the interview and said, as he got up to go: "Well, Mr. Oswald, I have decided that I want to get into the advertising business and that I want to work for you, and I thought the obvious thing to do was to come and tell you so. You don't seem to think I could make good and so I will have to set out to find some way to prove it to you. I don't know just how I can do it, but I'll call on you again when I have found out. Thank you for your time. Good- bye." And he was gone before I could say a word.

"Well, I was set back considerably! All my little speech had been lost entirely. He didn't even entertain my verdict! I sat for five minutes thinking about it. I was rather irritated to be thus turned down by a boy, so civilly but so very definitely. All the rest of the afternoon I felt decidedly chagrined.

"That night on the way home I thought it over again. One sentence stuck in my memory: 'I want to get into the advertising business and I want to work for you, and I thought the obvious thing to do was to come and tell you so.'

"It all struck me in a heap: How many of us have sense enough to see and do the obvious thing? And how many of us have persistency enough in following out our ideas of what is obvious? The more I thought of it the more convinced I became that in our organization there ought to be some place for a lad who had enough sense to see the obvious thing to do and then to go about it directly, without any fuss or fireworks, and do it!

"And by George, the next morning I sent for that lad and gave him a job checking and filing periodicals."

That was twenty years ago. Today Oliver B. Adams is the vice president and active head of the Oswald Advertising Agency. Old Oswald comes to the office once or twice a week and has a chat with Adams, and of course he

always attends directors' meetings, but otherwise Adams is the head of the business.

It all happened naturally enough, and it all came about through the "darned obviousness," as old man Oswald good-naturedly characterized it.

Before Adams had been working at this checking and filing job a month he went to his boss and suggested a change in the method of doing his work. His boss heard him through and then asked him what was to be gained. Adams told him that it would save about a quarter of the time and handling, and errors would be almost impossible. The change was simple and he was told to go ahead. After the new plan had been in operation three months he went to his boss again and told him that the new plan worked so well that a girl at two-thirds of his salary could take care of his work, and wasn't there something better for him? He said he noticed that the copy staff had to work nights, and he wondered if they didn't have so much work for the future that they could start in to train up a new man. The boss smiled and told him to go back to his work.

"You are no John Wanamaker." Back he went , but also he began to write copy during his spare time. The copy rush was on account of a big campaign for the California Peach Canners' Association. Adams proceeded to study up on the subject of peaches. He thought, studied, dreamed and ate peaches, fresh, canned and pickled. He sent for Government bulletins. He spent his evenings studying canning.

One day he sat at his little desk in the checking department putting the finishing touches on an advertisement he had written and laid out. The copy chief came in to ask him for a back number of a certain paper that was in the files. Adams went to get it, leaving the advertisement on top of his desk.

They copy chief's eye fell on it as he stood waiting.

"Six Minutes From Orchard to Can" was the heading. Then there were lay-outs for pictures illustrating the six operations necessary in canning the peaches, each with a little heading and a brief description of the process:

CALIFORNIA SUN-RIPENDED PEACHES

Picked ripe form the trees

Sorted by girls in clean white uniforms

Peeled and packed into the cans by sanitary machines

Cooked by clean live steam

Sealed airtight

Sent to your grocer for you – at 30 cents the can

The copy chief read the ad through and then read it through again.

When Adams got back to his desk the copy chief – Howland by name – was gone. So was the advertisement. In the front office Howland was talking with the president, and they were both looking at an ad lay-out on the president's desk.

"I tell you, Mr. Oswald, I believe that lad has the making of a copy man.

He's not clever – and goodness knows we have too many clever men in the shop already – but he seems to see the essential points and he puts them down clearly. To tell the truth he has said something that we upstairs have been trying to say for a week, and it has taken us three half-page ads to say it. I wish you'd apprentice that boy to me for a while. I'd like to see what's in him.

"By George, I'll do it," agreed Mr. Oswald. Whereupon he sent for Adams' boss.

"Could you get along without Adams, Mr. Wilcox?" he asked.

Mr. Wilcox smiled, "Why, yes, I guess so. He told me the other day that a girl at two-thirds his salary could do his work."

"All right; send him up to Mr. Howland."

And up Adams went to the copy department. His canned-peach copy had to be polished up, but this was given to one of the crack men, for there was need of haste, and Adams was given another subject to write on. His first attempts were pretty crude, and after several weeks the copy chief almost came to the conclusion that maybe he was mistaken in Adams after all.

Indeed, many uneventful weeks passed. Then one day a new account was landed by the Oswald Agency. It was for a package cake which was sold through the grocers. The firm had limited distribution, but it had been stung by the advertising bee; it wanted to grow faster. The company was working within a fifty-mile radius of New York.

Before any orders came through to the copy department some of the copy men got wind of it, and Adams heard them talking about it. That day he spent his noon hour looking up a grocery that sold the cake. He bought one and ate a liberal portion of it as his lunch. It was good.

That night when he went home he sat down and worked on the cake problem. Far into the night the gas burned up in his little third-floor-rear room.

Adams had made up his mind that if he had a chance at any of the cake copy he was going to make good on it.

The next morning the cake business came through to the copy room.

To Adams' great disappointment it was given to one of the older men. He thought the matter over all morning, and by noon he had decided that he was a chump for ever thinking that they would trust such copy to a kid like himself.

But he decided to keep working on that cake account during his spare time just as though it were his account.

Three weeks later the campaign opened up. When Adams saw the proofs of the first cake copy his heart sank. What copy! It fairly made one's mouth water! Preston was famous for food-product copy, but he had outdone himself on this cake. Adams felt completely discouraged. Never would he be able to write such copy, not in a million years! Why, that copy was literature.

It took mere cake at fifteen cents the loaf and made it fit food for angels. The campaign was mapped out for six months, and Adams carefully watched each advertisement, mentally resolving that he was going to school to that man Preston in the matter of copy.

Four months later, in spite of the wonderful copy running in the newspapers, both city and suburban, there were mutterings of dissatisfaction coming from the Golden Brown Cake Company. They liked the advertising; they agreed that it was the best cake advertising that had ever been done; it was increasing the business somewhat – but sales were not picking up as they had anticipated. At the end of another month they were more disappointed than ever, and finally, at the expiration of the six

months, they announced that they would discontinue advertising; it was not so profitable as they had hoped.

Adams felt as keenly disappointed as though he had been Mr. Oswald himself. He had become very much interested in that cake business. On the night he heard of the decision of the Golden Brown Cake Company to stop advertising he went home downcast. That evening he sat in his room thinking about Golden Brown Cake. After a while he went to a drawer and took out a big envelope containing the ads he had written for the cake months before.

He read them over; they sounded very homely after reading Preston's copy.

Then he looked over some posters he had laid out for his imaginary cake campaign. After that he assembled a new cartoon he had drawn out and colored with water colors.

He sat and looked at these things and thought and thought and thought. Then he fell to work revising his work of months before, polishing it up and making little changes here and there. As he worked his ideas began to develop. It was nearly three o'clock when he finally turned out his light and went to bed. The next morning he went to the office with his mind firmly made up as to what he should do. At ten c-clock he telephoned the front office and asked if he might come down and see Mr. Oswald. He was told to come ahead.

At eleven o'clock Mr. Oswald looked up from the last piece of copy for Adams' cake campaign and smiled.

"Adams," he said, " I believe you have hit it. WE have been doing wonderful cake advertising, but we have overlooked the very things you have pointed out in your plan. We have done too much advertising and not enough selling. I believe that with this plan I can go down and get that crowd back into the fold."

At three o'clock Adams was summoned to the president's office.

"Mr. Adams," said Mr. Oswald as he sat down. "the Golden Brown Cake Company is back with us, and with us strong. They say the plan looks good to them. So we are off for another campaign. Now I want you to take this material up to Mr. Howland and go over it with him. I have told him

about it, and he is just as pleased as I to think you have done it. I have told him to go over the copy with you. It is good copy, very good, but it is rough in spots, as you doubtless realize, and Mr. Howland can help you polish it up. Don't let this give you a swelled head though, young man. It takes more than one battle to make a campaign."

Adams was treading on air when he left the president's office, but after he had talked with the copy chief for an hour he was back on earth again, for he saw that there was much to be done before the copy would be fit to print.

However, his main ideas were to be followed out. They all agreed with him in his contention that people ought to taste the cake, and that to supply grocers with sample slices wrapped in oiled paper fresh every day for three weeks to give to their customers was a good idea; that his idea of showing the cake in natural colors on the posters where it would, as he expressed it, "make people's mouth water," was a good move; that giving up their old green package in favor of a tempting cake-brown carton with rich brown lettering would make for better display and appeal to the eye and the appetite. Some of these things Adams had learned back in the little New England grocery store, and they seemed to him perfectly natural things to do. They seemed so to Mr. Oswald and Mr. Howland and all the rest when they heard the plan, and every one of them wondered why he had not thought of them.

Before the first week of the sampling campaign was up the sales begun to show a substantial increase, and at the end of a month the Golden Brown Cake Company reported an increase of nearly thirty percent in their business in what was ordinarily the dullest month of the year. And that marked the beginning of one of the most successful local campaigns the Oswald Agency ever conducted.

Yes, the copy was simple – almost homely, in fact – but it had the flavor of the old New England kitchen on baking day, and it told of the clean, sunny bakery where Golden Brown Cakes were baked. In fact, it told it all so simply that it is entirely probable that it would have been turned down flat had not the previous campaign failed.

3.

Several months later there was a very important conference in the front office of the Oswald Agency. The officers of the Monarch Hat Company were closeted with the president and the copy chief. Conversation, sales reports and cigar smoke were consumed in about equal parts for nearly three hours. It seemed that the Monarch Hat Company had two retail stores in a large Southern city; that one of these stores was paying, though the other ran behind steadily. They did not want to abandon either store, for the city was large enough to support two stores, but they could not afford to go on losing.

Already they had sunk thousands of dollars in a special advertising campaign – which made the prospering store prosper even more, but did not pull the unprofitable store out of the loss column. Something had to be done – and done very quickly.

The conference had lasted until nearly lunchtime, but nothing had come of it. Every plan that had been suggested had either been tried or was impracticable.

“Well, gentlemen,” said Mr. Oswald at last, “we have spent three hours talking about what ought to be done, whereas it strikes me that our first job is to find out what is the matter. Will you give me two weeks to find out what the matter is, and then meet for another conference?"

They were all hungry; they were talked out; yes, they would agree.

“What’s your idea?” asked the copy chief after the crowd had left. Mr.

Oswald looked at him seriously. “Howland, I’m going to gamble. If I could spare the time I’d go down there myself and investigate, but I can’t. The Monarch people need never know about it, but we are going to send a boy down to that burg to see if he can find out what’s the matter."

“You don’t mean ---"

“Yes, we’re going to send young Adams. I have a sneaking suspicion that there is something obviously wrong in that situation – something that has nothing to do with sales reports or turnover – and if there is, by cracky, I’ll gamble that plain, everyday young man will ferret it out. ‘Obvious’ seems to be his middle name! Maybe I’m a fool, but I’m going to try it."

“Adams,” said the president, as that man stood before him, “the Monarch Hat Company has two stores in ---. One of them is paying and the other is not. I want you to go down there and find out – without asking, mind you – which of the stores is not paying, and then I want you to find out why.

Get some expense money from the cashier and leave in the morning. Come back when you feel reasonably sure you know the answer.."

Adams went. He went directly to a hotel when he struck town, registered and left his grip. Twenty minutes later he had found one store, located on the corner of two prominent streets, with a prominent entrance and display windows on both streets. The other store he found three-quarters of an hour later, right on Market Street, the main retail-store street of the city, also located on a corner. But Adams was surprised when he found the store to discover that he had passed it three times while he was looking for it!

He stood on the opposite corner and looked at the store. It had only a very narrow front on Market Street, but a very large display window on the intersecting-street side. He stood thinking. It struck him that the store was too hard to find. What if they did do heavy advertising – the other store would reap the benefit because it was so prominently located, even though not right on Market Street. Yes, he felt sure this was the unprofitable store.

As he stood watching the store he began to notice that more people went up on that side of the street, which meant that as they approached the store their eyes were focused ahead watching for the crossing policeman’s signal to cross, and as they did cross the intersecting street their backs were turned to the big side window. And even those who came down on that side of the street did not get a good view of this window because they were on the outside of the sidewalk, with a stream of people between them and the store.

He counted the people for periods of five minutes and found that nearly fifty percent more were going up on that side than were going down. Then he counted the passers on the other side and found that nearly fifty percent more were going down on that side. Clearly that store was paying almost twice as much rent for that side display window as it should, and Market Street rent must be enormous. People didn't see the store; people couldn't find the store easily.

That night he thought, figured and drew diagrams in his hotel room. His theory seemed to hold water; he felt sure he was right. The next night, after having studied the situation another day and obtained some rent and sales figures from the store manager, he took a sleeper back to new York.

A few months later, as soon as the lease expired, that store moved.

Adams had solved the riddle. It was really quite simple – when you knew the answer.

"It's that everlasting obviousness in Adams that I banked on. He doesn't get carried away from the facts; he just looks them squarely in the face and then proceeds to analyze, and that is half the battle." Thus spoke Mr. Oswald to the copy chief.

That was the beginning of a series of incidents that sent Adams right to the front in the Oswald Agency, and led eventually to his owning an interest.

There was nothing spectacular about any of them. They were simply horse- sense analyses of situations, and then more horse sense in the working out of a plan.

4.

Came a letter – from a manufacturer of bond paper saying that they were interested in advertising and they wondered if some man from the Oswald Agency wouldn't come out to their mill and talk it over with them. As it happened, the day the letter came Mr. Oswald was sailing for Europe at eleven o'clock. The letter came in the morning mail and Adams just happened to be in the president's office when he picked it out of the basket on his desk.

"How'd you like to go out and talk to these people, Adams?" asked Mr. Oswald with a quizzical smile, handing him the letter. He like to try out new combinations of men and jobs.

"Oh, I'd like to," said Adams, his face lighting up with pleasure at the thought of such a mission.

"Then go, and good luck to you," said the chief, and he turned and plunged in to the last-minute details of departure.

Adams went the next morning. The paper-mill president asked him if he thought bond paper could be advertised successfully. Adams replied that he couldn't tell until he knew more about the mill and the product. He had to have the facts. He was given a guide, and for the next two days he fairly wallowed in paper.

He found that this mill's paper was made of selected white rags; that the purest filtered water was used in the making; that it was dried in a clean loft; and, most surprising of all, it was gone over sheet by sheet and inspected by hand. These things weren't general knowledge in those days, and Adams saw great possibilities for advertising.

The third day he spent in his hotel room laying out some tentative advertisements. These he took with him late in the afternoon and went to call on the president. The president looked them over and grunted. Plainly he was disappointed. Adams' heart sank; he was going to fail on his first selling trip. But not without a fight.

The president rocked back and forth in his chair for a few minutes.

“Young man,” he said finally, “every good bond paper is made of carefully selected rags” – quoting from the advertisement in his hand; “every good bond paper is made with pure filtered water; every good bond paper is loft dried; all good papers are hand inspected. I didn’t need to get an advertising man from New York to tell me that. What I wanted was some original ideas. Every one knows these things about bond paper."

“Why, is that so?” said Adams. “I never knew that! Our agency controls the purchase of many thousands of dollars’ worth of bond papers every year, yet I venture to say that not a single man in our organization knows much about paper making, excepting that good paper is made of rags.

You see, Mr. Merritt, we aren’t any of us paper makers, and no one has ever told us these things. I know there is nothing clever about these advertisements. They are just simple statements of fact. But I honestly believe that the telling of them in a simple, straight-forward way as qualities of your paper, moth after month, would in a comparatively short time make people begin to think of yours as something above the ordinary among bond papers. You would be two or three years at least ahead of your competitors, and by the time they got around to advertising, your paper would already be entrenched in the public mind. It would be almost a synonym for the best in bond paper."

Mr. Merritt was evidently impressed by the logic of Adams’ argument, yet he hesitated.

“But we would be the laughing stock of all the paper makers in the country if they saw us come out and talk that way about our paper when all of the good ones make their paper that way."

Adams bent forward and looked Mr. Merritt squarely in the eyes. “Mr. Merritt, to whom are you advertising – paper makers or paper users?"

“I get your point,” said the president. “You are right. I begin to see that advertising is not white magic, but, like everything else, just plain common sense."

And Adams went back to new York with a contract for a year’s campaign, to be conducted as Oswald Agency saw fit. The paper campaign

was a success from the start. Yet, when it was analyzed, Adams had done nothing but the obvious.

5.

In due time Mr. Oswald over in Europe heard of Adams' success in securing the account, and in due time came a little note of congratulation from the president, and the thing that puzzled Adams was that the envelope was addressed to "Obvious Adams." That name "Obvious" spread all through the organization, and it stuck. Then the bond-paper campaign came into prominence, and with it Adams, and with him the new name. Today he is known among advertising men from the Atlantic to the Pacific, and it is doubtful if more than a score of them know his real name, for he always signs himself as "O.B. Adams."

Nearly every magazine you pick up shows the influence of his obviousness. In advertising Monarch Hats, for instance, they had always been shown on full-length figures of men, making the hats very small and inconspicuous.

"Let's show the hat, not the man," said Adams one day as he looked at one of the large original photographs in the art department. "If men could see such a picture as this they would buy that hat. We lose too much when we reduce the picture to such a small size." Whereupon he grabbed a pairs of shears and sliced that perfectly good picture on all sides until there was nothing left but a hat, a smiling face and a suggestion of a collar and necktie. "Now," laying it onto a magazine page, which it nearly filled, "run that and put your copy in that bare left-hand corner." Nowadays you often open a magazine and find a face almost as large as your own smiling out at you – and you see it too! So, you see, Adams was really the Griffith of the advertising business, with his "close- ups." Both of them merely did the obvious.

Adams also discovered that advertisements did not always have to shriek out their message in two-inch type. He proved that people would read a four-page advertisement set solid in small type, if it were made interesting and dramatic like any other good story. Quite an obvious way to tell about your business, too, when you come to think of it.

You may be surprised to learn that Adams is not a particularly interesting man to meet. He has none of the attributes commonly ascribed to genius; he is not temperamental. Since those early days he has been through many hard-fought campaigns, counseling here, directing there, holding back occasionally, making mistakes now and then but never the same one twice.

He has nursed numberless sick businesses back to health and rosy bank accounts through his skill in merchandising. He has helped businesses to grow from loft rooms to great plants covering acres. He has altered a nations breakfast habits. He has transformed trade names into dictionary nouns. But, for all his experience and reputation, he is rather uninteresting to meet – that is, unless you should catch him some evening in his home as I did, and he should sit in the comfortable living room in front of the fireplace puffing contentedly on a good cigar.

It was in response to the question: “How did you come to acquire the name ‘Obvious’?” that he told me some of the incidents I have just related.

“I wasn’t born ‘Obvious,’” he chuckled. “I had ‘Obvious’ thrust upon me in the old days by Mr. Oswald. I never stopped to think in those days whether a thing was obvious or not. I just did what occurred to me naturally after I had thought things over. There is no credit coming to me. I couldn’t help it."

“Well,” I pressed, “why don’t more businessmen do the obvious then? The men in your office say that they often spend hours trying to figure out what you are going to propose after they have decided what they think is the obvious thing to be done. And yet you fool them repeatedly."

Adams smiled, “Well,” he said, “since I had that name wished upon me I have given considerable thought to that very question, and I have decided that picking out the obvious thing presupposes analysis, and analysis presupposes thinking, and I guess Professor Zueblin is right when he says that thinking is the hardest work many people have to do, and they don’t like to do any more of it than they can help. They look for a royal road through some short cut in the form of a clever scheme or stunt, which they call the obvious thing to do; but calling it doesn’t make it so.

They don’t gather all the facts and then analyze them before deciding what really is the obvious thing, and thereby they overlook the first and most obvious of all business principles. Nearly always that is the difference

between the small businessman and the big, successful one. Many small businessmen have an aggravated case of business astigmatism which could be cured if they would follow the obvious course of calling in some business specialist to correct their vision and give them a true view of their business and methods. And that might be said of a lot of big business too.

“Some day,” he continued, “ a lot of businessmen are going to wake up to the power and sanity of the obvious. Some have already. Theodore Vail, for instance, worried over the telegraph equipment that stood practically idle eight hours out of the twenty-four and he conceived the night letter idea to spread out the business over the dull hours and make more new business. What could have been more obvious? “Study most of the men whoa re getting salaries of upward of one hundred thousand dollars a year. They are nearly all doers of the obvious.

“Some day I expect to see our municipalities wake up to the fact that they are overlooking the obvious when they allow our great libraries, upon which we spend hundred of thousands of dollars each year, to run along year in year out only half fulfilling their mission, when a paltry two or three percent of the total appropriation spent in sane newspaper advertising to sell the library idea – the library habit, if you please – to the people would double the usefulness of our libraries to their communities. What a wonderful thing to advertise – a library! Or a great art museum!

“The day will come, too, I think, when our railroads will get over their secrecy about fares. They will get hundreds of thousands of dollars from people who do not travel now, but who would if they realized how little it costs to travel comparatively short distances. They will publish the prices of their tickets from city to city in their time-tables – not between all stations, to be sure, but between the larger places. Now instead they put their fingers to their lips and say in a whisper things such as ‘Ssh! We charge an extra fare on this train, but we are not going to tell you how much it is – and you’ll never guess!

Ssh!’ Why, I know a man who lived in New York for five years, and all that time he wanted to go to Philadelphia to see the city, but he never did because he thought it cost much more than it does. He lacked the imagination to ask; but asking should not be necessary. Some day the railroads are going to do the obvious and advertise to that man. And there are hundreds of thousands of him."

At this point Mr. Adams looked at the clock. Then he excused himself while he called up his garage and ordered his car. He was leaving on the night train for Chicago to tackle a difficult situation that had developed in the business of a large client, a big breakfast-cereal manufacturer out West. They had sent for Adams, medicine man of business. He would be able to prescribe the remedy.

As we rode into the city in the luxurious limousine he sat deep in thought.

I sat and thought too. What was the secret of this man's success? I asked myself. And then I recalled the little boy's composition on the mountains of Holland. He wrote:

THE MOUNTAINS OF HOLLAND

There are no mountains in Holland.

This is the answer, I decided. There is no secret – it is obvious!

About the Author

Robert Rawls Updegraff (1889-1977) was a business counselor who, for about 40 years, served as a personal advisor to the top management of leading American companies including: Aluminum Company of America, American Brake Shoe Company, General Foods Corporation, Hart, Schaffner & Marx, John Hancock Mutual Life Insurance Company, Kellogg Company, Lever Bros. Company, and Westinghouse Electric Corporation.

Updegraff's most famous work was "Obvious Adams," a book based on the 1916 The Saturday Evening Post column of the same name. He also wrote a number of other books including "All The Time You Need; The Greatest Gift In The World", "A New 'Bag of Tricks' for Every Business" and "The Subconscious Mind in Business; A Six-hour Work Day for Executives."

"Never complain about your troubles; they are responsible for more than half of your income." - Robert R. Updegraff

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